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SUBJECT: Unexpectedly Active Opposition in Southwest Belarus

Ref: 03 Minsk 1936

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: September 12 was the tenth anniversary of the Belarusian military shooting down a hot air balloon and killing the two American pilots. Emboffs and local residents visited the crash site. While in the region, Emboffs also visited local civil society leaders in three nearby small towns. These visits demonstrated the essential role of leadership in mobilizing opposition to Lukashenko. Civil groups in two of the towns had strong local leaders, and as a result were much more active than is the norm in Belarus, particularly in distributing underground newspapers. In the third, an impressive newspaper editor has kept her embattled paper alive and spreading independent information, while the local political parties languish under weak leadership. There was nothing out of the ordinary about the citizens of these towns, demonstrating the possibilities throughout Belarus, if only the opposition could find good leadership. End summary.

Balloonists Remembered

¶2. (U) On September 12 Poloff and PAO traveled to a small village outside the town of Beryoza, southwestern Belarus, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Belarusian military shooting down a hot air balloon and killing the two Amcit pilots. Local residents guided Emboffs first to a marker placed by the GOB remembering, "two Americans who tragically died here." However, the GOB marker was approximately a kilometer from the actual crash site. Locals then led the Emboffs to the actual site, where local residents themselves placed a large stone marker, marked with the date (12.9.1995) and the Belarusian word "Probachte" [Forgive Us].

¶3. (U) Two villagers appeared and said they had witnessed the shoot-down and were the first to find the crashed balloon. Contradicting the official Belarusian report, the two said the military helicopter opened fire immediately on the balloon, firing into the gondola. They said from the state of the bodies it was clear one of the pilots was killed by large caliber gunfire and the other by the fall.

The local residents all thanked Emboffs for visiting the site, with several opining their own government cares little for its citizens. They also expressed outrage that the helicopter pilot received a medal from the state for these murders. A local journalist covered the visit and will publish a story in a local newspaper. Emboffs thanked the locals for caring for the site and remembering the pilots. [Note: on September 13 an aide to Lukashenko published an editorial in the main state newspaper, Sovetskaya Belarus, lauding Lukashenko for having the courage to shoot down this hot air balloon since it was "spying" near a "secret Belarusian nuclear facility."]

The Value of Leadership

¶4. (C) Emboffs then visited three small towns in the area, Beryoza (pop. 30,000), Beloozyorsk (pop. 13,000) and Ivatsevichi (pop. 25,000). In all three Emboffs found an atypically high level of political and social activity by local civil society. One local leader stated that Belarusians are all the same across the country, but what makes this region an exception is the local pro-democracy leadership. This certainly seemed true, and a weak party leadership in Ivatsevichi provided a strong counter example.

Thriving Nationalists in Beryoza

¶5. (C) Beryoza is a small town whose main employer is a state owned tile factory. The GOB invested in new Italian equipment for the factory, which cut in half the number of needed employees. However, with Lukashenko's emphasis on social justice, the factory was not allowed to fire anyone. It now overproduces and employees are forced to take two months vacation for every month they work, thereby earning USD 150 every three months. Management does better at USD 350 a month. Other workers in the region are also struggling; one person said as a baker she earns USD 70 a month, and a local collective farm manager stated agricultural workers earn USD 80 a month, but must work 26 days a month.

¶6. (C) Emboffs met with the leadership of local civil society. All represented nationalist groups: the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), Belarusian Language Society (BLS), and Vyasnna human rights NGO. Other groups are not active in the town. This group faces the usual regime pressures against civil society, including: constant state propaganda which has convinced most to support Lukashenko because, "at least there is no war;" an independent journalist who was fined USD 200, with another USD 1,300 in court costs, for writing about election fraud; party members fired from their jobs; citizens told to vote for Lukashenko in early voting or lose their jobs; and an activist's son who was forced to join the state youth group, BRSM, while in the army. They also explained that the GOB ordered the local post office to find 30 new subscribers for the main state newspaper, Sovetskaya Belarus. When the post office only found 14, the post office's employees were forced to pay for the other 16 subscriptions.

¶7. (C) Despite these problems, Beryoza's pro-democracy forces are more active than most. Unlike in many cities, they were not afraid to meet Emboffs in public or take them to an apartment. Throughout the entire meeting our interlocutors were busy collating the current issue of their samizdat (underground) newspaper, Beryozavy Venik. The group distributes around 1,000 copies of this paper every two weeks, as well as hundreds of copies of other underground papers. All thanked the USG for providing the funds for these papers, through the Embassy's Democracy Commission, and asked that the USG continue to help the

free flow of information in Belarus. They had also recently held a local convention to choose delegates for the 10+ coalition's single candidate process. [Note: Because local groups are all nationalist, they elected pro-Milinkevich delegates.] The raion (local district) ideology officer attended and denounced the convention, but did not interfere.

Active Samizdat in Beloozyorsk

¶18. (C) In Beloozyorsk Emboffs met with three pro-democracy members of the town council. Beloozyorsk was the only city in Belarus where the opposition won a majority on the local council in 2003's municipal elections. It then became the first town to hold bi-elections, where the opposition lost its majority (reftel). Now, nine of the 30 local councilors are pro-democracy; two others resigned under heavy regime pressure. Despite their minority status, they are still able to serve their city. For example, much to the annoyance of the pro-Lukashenko majority, they are investigating how local officials misused the town's budget. Even so, there are limits. Local authorities blocked them from bringing in outside experts to discuss citizen rights regarding communal service payments (rent and utilities), and they are unable to rent an office to meet constituents.

¶19. (C) One local councilor, Yury Guberavich, stated civil society in Beloozyorsk is sufficiently strong that the local government does not fire pro-democracy activists or remove their children from school, as is common elsewhere in Belarus. Guberavich explained there is nothing special about the citizens of Beloozyorsk -- they are the same as the rest of Belarusians. The difference is that Beloozyorsk civil society has effective leadership. As a result, local parties have dozens of activists experienced

at collecting signatures and speaking with voters. Guberavich and his team also run a local NGO resource center, which has a USG-funded risograph hidden in the city. They use the machine to print thousands of samizdat newspapers every month for Beloozyorsk, Beryoza and Ivatsevichi. Their main paper is Altanka, with 1,250 copies twice a month. A local unregistered women's group, Tais, has a paper with 700 copies a month, and there are several others. Activists in both Beryoza and Beloozyorsk said they attract new members through clinics offering free legal advice.

Mixed News in Ivatsevichi

¶10. (C) In Ivatsevichi Emboffs met with Lidiya Tselvyiko, editor of the local independent newspaper Gazeta dlya Vas [Newspaper for You], and Ivan Vabishevich, the local leader of the United Civic Party (UCP). Tselvyiko seemed to be an energetic and determined journalist. She stated repression by authorities has greatly increased in the past year. Her staff used to have no problem speaking with local authorities, but for the past year they have been denied access. Even though the newspaper is registered, in May the city stopped allowing her to sell the paper through state newspaper kiosks. This cut weekly circulation from 8,000 to 6,000. Gazeta dlya Vas tried to compensate by creating a newspaper delivery network, but police routinely arrest the paperboys and hold them for three hours, so there is very high staff turnover. Local BKGB often call in her journalists for questioning. The paper was also fined USD 350 recently for "slander," after accidentally misspelling someone's name in an article. Despite these problems, the editor insisted her paper does not self-censure and remains the most popular paper in the city. Even though local officials warn businesses away, she said most still advertise in her paper. In contrast, she said the local state paper has a weekly circulation of 9,000,

but only because the state forces pensioners to subscribe and deducts the cost from their pensions.

¶11. (C) On the other hand, the local UCP leader was not impressive. Vabishevich is an elderly gentleman, given to long bouts of pointless chatter. His personal characteristics are evident in the weak party structure in Ivatsevichi. The UCP and BPF both have small structures, and there is a small group of pro-democracy communists. None of these parties' branches are registered. They advertised their local delegate convention in Gazeta dlya Vas for several weeks, but still only attracted 28 participants. To avoid police harassment, they did not list the location in their advertisement, which likely hurt attendance. The newspaper editor later explained that five years ago the BPF had a strong branch in Ivatsevichi, but it fell apart after its leader was fired from his job and quit politics.

¶12. (C) Comment: After visiting these three towns, Post agrees with Gubarevich that leadership is key. Beryoza and Beloozyorsk have strong pro-democracy leaders, who are able to operate and spread their message, despite regime efforts. Ivatsevichi's newspaper editor has built a strong, if struggling news outlet. Its parties, though, clearly show the lack of effective leadership. Although western Belarusians may be slightly more prone to political activism, due to historical and cultural legacies, these examples show what is possible if the opposition were able to provide effective, strong leadership.

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